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UNCLAS VIENNA 003064

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR CA/VO, EUR/ERA AND EUR/AGS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: VISA WAIVER PROGRAM: AUSTRIA REQUESTS EXTENSION

REFS: A) STATE 162157 B) PARIS 6169 C) ROME 3038 D)

VIENNA 2987

1. (SBU) Secretary General Johannes Kyrle (the third-ranking MFA official) raised the issue of the Visa Waiver Program (VWP) as the first order of business in his meeting with visiting EUR PDAS Kurt Volker. In a follow-up to Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik's pointed comments to Ambassador and DCM on September 7 (ref D), as well as the FM's meeting with Secretary Rice on September 9, Kyrle noted that a requirement that Austrian citizens with passports issued after October 26 apply for visas would create significant domestic political problems for Chancellor Schuessel's government and place a burden on U.S.-Austrian relations at a sensitive time.

2. (SBU) On the positive side, Kyrle said that Austria expected to be able to issue fully compliant passports - with both a digital photo and a biometric microchip - by March 2006. However, his Interior Ministry colleagues had informed him that Austria could not possibly meet the October 26, 2005 deadline for digitized photos.

3. (SBU) In view of Austria moving to full Level 2 compliance months before the deadline, Kyrle said, Austria would enormously appreciate it if the U.S. administration would ensure that Austria could continue to participate fully in the VWP during the intervening time (until March 2006). Kyrle assured us that Austria would also provide full cooperation on information-sharing regarding lost and stolen passports and other passport security issues. Kyrle added that ForMin Plassnik would be writing to Secretary Rice asking for her help in obtaining an extension of the deadline for Level I compliance.

4. (SBU) PDAS Volker responded that Secretaries Chertoff and Rice would be the appropriate recipients of such a request. Given the legislative history of the biometric requirement, however, he anticipated that it would be difficult to persuade the U.S. Congress of the desirability of further extensions. Volker and Ambassador Brown urged the GoA to prepare public information campaigns about the coming changes to the Visa Waiver Program, along with actions to mitigate the impact. For example, it might be possible for parliament

to amend Austria's passport laws to permit extensions of  
expiring passports. The government could also actively  
encourage prospective travelers to apply for new  
passports for issuance before the October 26 deadline.

BROWN